Michael Landon

Michael Landon (born **Eugene Maurice Orowitz**; October 31, 1936 – July 1, 1991) was an American actor and filmmaker. He is known for his roles as Little Joe Cartwright in *Bonanza* (1959–1973), Charles Ingalls in *Little House on the Prairie* (1974–1982), and Jonathan Smith in *Highway to Heaven* (1984–1989). Landon appeared on the cover of *TV Guide* 22 times, second only to Lucille Ball.[1]

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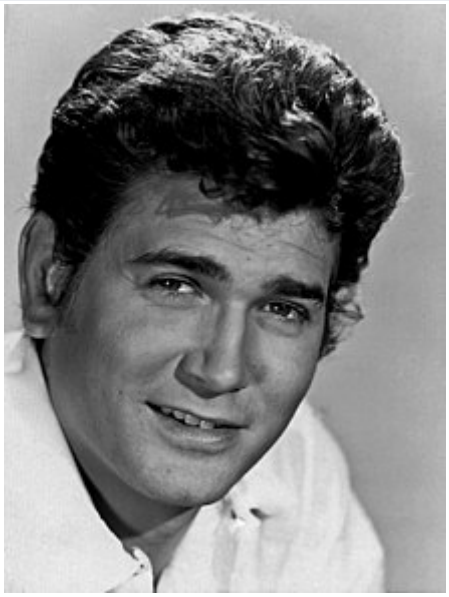
Michael Landon



Landon in the 1960s

Born	Eugene Maurice Orowitz October 31, 1936 Forest Hills, Queens, New York, U.S.
Died	July 1, 1991 (aged 54) Malibu, California, U.S.
Resting place	Hillside Memorial Park Cemetery
Occupation	Actor · writer · producer · director · singer
Years active	1955–1991
Spouse(s)	Dodie Levy-Fraser (m. 1956; div. 1962) Marjorie Lynn Noe (m. 1963; div. 1982) Cindy Clerico (m. 1983)
Children	9, including Mark, Leslie, Michael Jr.,

Early life

Landon was born Eugene Maurice Orowitz on October 31, 1936, in Forest Hills, a neighborhood of Queens, New York, New York.[2][3] His parents were Peggy (née O'Neill; a dancer and comedian) and Eli Maurice Orowitz. His father was Jewish,[4] and his mother was Roman Catholic. Eugene was the Orowitz family's second child; their daughter, Evelyn, was born three years earlier, in 1933. In 1941, when Landon was four years old, he and his family moved to the borough of Collingswood, New Jersey, near Philadelphia. He attended, and celebrated his bar mitzvah at Temple Beth Sholom. His family recalls that Landon "went

through a lot of hassle studying for the big event, which included bicycling to a nearby town every day in order to learn how to read Hebrew and recite prayers."[5]

	Christopher and Jennifer Landon
Relatives	Rachel Matthews (granddaughter)

During his childhood, Landon was constantly worrying about his mother attempting suicide. On a family beach vacation, his mother tried to drown herself, but he rescued her. Shortly after the attempt, his mother acted as if nothing happened, and a few minutes later, he vomited. He said that it was the worst experience of his life.[4] Stress overload from the suicide attempts of his mother caused Landon to battle the childhood problem of bedwetting, which was documented in the unauthorized biography *Michael Landon: His Triumph and Tragedy*. His mother put his wet sheets on display outside his window for all to see. He ran home every day and tried to remove them before his classmates could see.[6]

Landon attended Collingswood High School[2][4] and was an excellent javelin thrower, with his 193 ft 4 in (58.93 m) toss in 1954 being the longest throw by a high schooler in the United States that year.[7] This earned him an athletic scholarship to the University of Southern California, but he subsequently tore his shoulder ligaments, putting an end to his days as a college athlete and as a student. Landon considered show-business and served as an attendant at a service gas station opposite the studios of Warner Bros. He was eventually noticed by Bob Raison, a local agent.[8] Following advice, Landon changed his surname, selecting a new one from a phone book.[2]

Career

Early work

Landon's first starring appearance was on the television series *Telephone Time*, in the episode "The Mystery of Casper Hauser" (1956) as the title character. Other parts came: movie roles in *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957), *Maracaibo* (1958), *High School Confidential* (1958), the notorious *God's Little Acre* (1958), and *The Legend of Tom Dooley* (1959), as well as many roles on television, such as *Crossroads* (three episodes), *The Restless Gun* (pilot episode aired on *Schlitz Playhouse of Stars*), *Sheriff of Cochise* (in "Human Bomb"), *U.S. Marshal* (as Don Sayers in "The Champ"), *Crusader*, *Frontier Doctor*, *The Rifleman* (in "End of a Young Gun", 1958), *The Adventures of Jim Bowie*, *Johnny Staccato*, *Wire Service*, *General Electric Theater*, *The Court of Last Resort*, *State Trooper* (two episodes), *Tales of Wells Fargo* (three episodes), *The Texan* (in the 1958 episode "The Hemp Tree"), *The Tall Man*, *Tombstone Territory* (in the episodes "The Man From Brewster", with John Carradine[9] and "Rose of the Rio Bravo", with Kathleen Nolan), *Trackdown* (two 1958 episodes), and *Wanted Dead or Alive*, starring Steve McQueen (in episodes "The Martin Poster", 1958, and "The Legend", 1959). Landon also appeared in at least 2 episodes of *Dick Powell's Zane Grey Theater* including "Gift from a Gunman" in 1957 and "Living is a Lonely Thing" in 1959.

Landon can be seen in two uncredited speaking roles as a cavalry trooper in a 1956 episode of the ABC/Warner Bros. television series *Cheyenne*, an episode titled "Decision." Two years later, Landon returned to that same series in "The White Warrior". He was then cast as White Hawk a.k.a. Alan Horn, a young white man who, like Cheyenne Bodie, was raised by Native Americans after the slaughter of his parents. White Hawk rises to the occasion to help Cheyenne as he heads a wagon train to California amid the threat of the Apaches.

Bonanza

In 1959, at the age of 22, Landon began his first starring TV role as Little Joe Cartwright on *Bonanza*, one of the first TV series to be broadcast in color. Also starring on the show were Lorne Greene, Pernell Roberts, and Dan Blocker. During *Bonanza*'s sixth season (1964–1965), the show topped the Nielsen ratings and remained number one for three years.

Landon in *Bonanza* (1960)

Receiving more fan mail than any other cast member,[10] Landon negotiated with executive producer David Dortort and NBC to write and direct some episodes. In 1962, Landon wrote his first script. In 1968, Landon directed his first episode. In 1993, *TV Guide* listed Little Joe's September 1972 two-hour wedding episode ("Forever") as one of TV's most memorable specials. Landon's script recalled Little Joe's brother, Hoss, who was initially the story's groom, before Dan Blocker's death. During the final season, the ratings declined, and NBC canceled *Bonanza* in November 1972. The last episode aired on January 16, 1973.

Along with Lorne Greene and Victor Sen Yung, Landon appeared in all 14 seasons of the series. Landon was loyal to many of his *Bonanza* associates including producer Kent McCray, director William F. Claxton, and composer David Rose, who remained with him throughout *Bonanza* as well as *Little House on the Prairie* and *Highway to Heaven*.

Little House on the Prairie

The year after *Bonanza* was canceled, Landon went on to star as Charles Ingalls in the pilot of what became another successful television series, *Little House on the Prairie*, again for NBC. The show was taken from a 1935 book written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, whose character in the show was played by nine-year-old actress Melissa Gilbert. In addition to Gilbert, two other unknown actresses also starred on the show: Melissa Sue Anderson, who appeared as Mary Ingalls, the oldest daughter in the Ingalls family, and Karen Grassle as Charles' wife, Caroline. Landon served as executive producer, writer, and director of *Little House.*

Landon as Charles Ingalls, 1974

The show was nominated for several Emmy and Golden Globe awards. After eight seasons, *Little House* was retooled by NBC in 1982 as *Little House: A New Beginning*, which focused on the Wilder family and the Walnut Grove community. Though Landon remained the show's executive producer, director and writer, *A New Beginning* did not feature Charles and Caroline Ingalls. *A New Beginning* was actually the final chapter of *Little House,* as the series ended in 1983. The following year, three made-for-television movies aired.

Melissa Gilbert said of her on- and off-screen chemistry with Landon, "He was very much like a 'second father' to me. My own father passed away when I was 11, so, without really officially announcing it, Michael really stepped in." When not working on the *Little House* set, Gilbert spent most of the weekends visiting Landon's real-life family. She once said, "The house was huge. We ran like banshees through that house, and Mike would hide behind doorways and jump out and scare us." In a 2015 interview, Gilbert said of Landon, "He gave me so much advice...the overall idea that he pounded into me, from a little girl, into my brain was that nothing's more important than 'Home & Family'; no success, no career, no achievements, no accomplishments, nothing's more important than loving the people you love and

contributing to a community. Though we were working, really, really hard, we were 'Not Saving The World', one episode of television at a time, we're just entertaining people and there are more important things to do... and have fun; no matter what."[11]

Highway to Heaven

After producing both "Little House" and later the *Father Murphy* TV series, Landon starred in another successful program. In *Highway to Heaven*, he played a probationary angel (who named himself Jonathan Smith) whose job was to help people in order to earn his wings. His co-star on the show was Victor French (who had previously co-starred on Landon's *Little House on the Prairie*) as ex-cop Mark Gordon. On *Highway*, Landon served as executive producer, writer, and director. *Highway to Heaven* was the only show throughout his long career in television that he owned outright.

By 1985, prior to hiring his son, Michael Landon Jr., as a member of his camera crew, he also brought real-life cancer patients and disabled people to the set. His decision to work with disabled people led him to hire a couple of adults with disabilities to write episodes for *Highway to Heaven*.

By season four, *Highway* dropped out of the Nielsen top 30, and in June 1988, NBC announced that the series would return for an abbreviated fifth season, which would be its last. Its final episodes were filmed in the fall of 1988. One aired in September, two in December, one in March 1989, and the remainder aired on Fridays from June to August. French did not live to see *Highway*'s series finale broadcast; he died of advanced lung cancer on June 15, 1989, two months after it was diagnosed. Landon invited his youngest daughter, Jennifer Landon, to take part in the final episode.

Other projects

Landon at the 42nd Emmy Awards Governor's Ball, September 1990

In 1972, he was among the guests in David Winters' musical television special *The Special London Bridge Special*, starring Tom Jones, and Jennifer O'Neill.[12]

In 1973, Landon was an episode director and writer for the short-lived NBC romantic anthology series *Love Story*. In 1982, he co-produced an NBC "true story" television movie, *Love Is Forever*,[13] starring himself and Laura Gemser (who was credited as Moira Chen), about Australian photojournalist John Everingham's successful attempt to scuba dive under the Mekong to rescue his lover from communist-ruled Laos in 1977. The real Everingham was cast as an extra in the film.

Sam's Son was a 1984 coming-of-age feature film written and directed by Landon and loosely based on his early life. The film stars Timothy Patrick Murphy, Eli Wallach, Anne Jackson, Hallie Todd, and James Karen. Karen previously worked for Landon in the made-for-television film *Little House: The Last Farewell*.

He was a guest of the PBS television series *The Electric Company*.

After the cancellation of *Highway to Heaven* and before his move to CBS, Landon wrote and directed the teleplay *Where Pigeons Go to Die*. Based on a novel of the same name, the film starred Art Carney and was nominated for two Emmy awards.

Up through the run of *Highway to Heaven*, all of Landon's television programs were broadcast on NBC, a relationship of which lasted thirty consecutive years with the network. After the cancellation of *Highway* and due to a fallout with those within NBC's upper management,[14] he moved to CBS and in 1991 starred in a two-hour pilot called *Us*. *Us* was meant to be another series for Landon but, with his diagnosis on April 5 of pancreatic cancer, the show never aired beyond the pilot. Also during the 1990–91 season, Landon appeared as host of the CBS special *America's Missing Children*, which explored actual cases of missing children that were under investigation. This special was, as well, being considered as the pilot for a new series.[15]

Landon also appeared as a celebrity panelist on the premiere week of *Match Game* on CBS.

Singing

Landon also had a singing career, of the teen idol type.[16]

In 1957, Candlelight Records released a Michael Landon single "Gimme a Little Kiss (Will "Ya" Huh)"/ "Be Patient With Me" during the height of his notoriety for his role in the film *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*. Some copies show the artist credited as the "Teenage Werewolf" rather than as Michael Landon. In 1962, both the A- and B-side of the record were re-released on the Fono-Graf label that included a picture sleeve of Landon's then-current role on *Bonanza* as Little Joe Cartwright.

In 1964, RCA Victor Records released another Landon single, "Linda Is Lonesome"/"Without You". All of Landon's singles have since been issued on compact disc by Bear Family Records as part of a *Bonanza* various artists compilation.[17]

Landon sang on television, on the *Dean Martin Show*,[18] *Hullabaloo*,[19] and other venues,[20] and also sang live on stage at theatrical venues (sometimes with a holster and gun strapped to his hip).[21][22]

Personal life

Landon was married three times, and fathered nine children.

- Dodie Levy-Fraser (married 1956; divorced 1962)
  - Mark Fraser Landon (adopted; Dodie's biological son)[23]
  - Josh Fraser Landon (adopted as infant)
- Marjorie Lynn Noe (married 1963; divorced 1982)
  - Cheryl Lynn Landon (born Cheryl Ann Pontrelli), Lynn's daughter from her first marriage; she was nine when her mother and Landon married.
  - Leslie Ann Landon
  - Michael Landon Jr.
  - Shawna Leigh Landon
  - Christopher Beau Landon
- Cindy Clerico (married 1983), a makeup artist on *Little House on the Prairie*
  - Jennifer Rachel Landon
  - Sean Matthew Landon

In February 1959, Landon's father died from a heart attack. In 1973, his eldest daughter, Cheryl, and three others were involved in a serious car collision just outside Tucson, Arizona, while a student at the University of Arizona. She was the sole survivor. She was hospitalized with serious injuries and remained in a coma for days. Landon's mother, Peggy, died in March 1981.[24]

Landon admitted to being a chain smoker and heavy drinker.[24]

Illness and death

Crypt of Michael Landon at Hillside Memorial Park

On April 2, 1991, Landon began to suffer from a severe headache while he was on a skiing vacation in Utah.[25] Three days later, he was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of pancreatic cancer known as exocrine adenocarcinoma, which had begun to impact the tissues and blood vessels around his pancreas.[25] The cancer was inoperable and terminal.[25] On May 9, he appeared on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* to speak about the cancer and condemn the tabloid press for its sensational headlines and inaccurate stories, including the claim that he and his wife were trying to conceive another child. During his appearance, Landon pledged to fight the disease and asked his fans to pray for him. Twelve days after his appearance on the show, he underwent successful surgery for a near-fatal blood clot in his left leg.[26] In June, he appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine after granting the periodical an exclusive private interview about his life, his family, and his struggle to live. On July 1, at age 54, Landon died in Malibu, California.[2][3] Landon was interred in a private family mausoleum at Hillside Memorial Park Cemetery, in Culver City, California. Landon's headstone reads, "He seized life with joy. He gave to life generously. He leaves a legacy of love and laughter." His son, Mark, who died in May 2009, is also interred there.[27]

Legacy

Landon's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame

A community building at Malibu's Bluffs Park was named "The Michael Landon Center" following the actor's death. Landon's son, Michael Jr., produced a memorial special called *Michael Landon: Memories with Laughter and Love*, featuring the actor's family, friends and co-stars: *Bonanza* co-star David Canary said that one word that described Landon was "fearless" in his dealings with network brass. Melissa Gilbert, who played his daughter on *Little House* said that the actor made her feel "incredibly safe" and that he was "paternal". Often cited on the special was Landon's bizarre sense of humor, which included having toads leap from his mouth and dressing as a superhero to visit a pizza parlor.

In 1991, during Landon's final *Tonight Show* appearance, Johnny Carson related how the actor took him back to a restaurant the two had dined at previously. Carson had been led to believe he accidentally ran over the owner's cat in the parking lot during their first visit. When sitting down to eat the second time, Carson discovered that Landon had helped create a fake menu of dinner items featuring cat metaphors.

A made-for-TV movie, *Michael Landon, the Father I Knew*, co-written and directed by his son Michael Jr., aired on CBS in May 1999. John Schneider starred in the title role as Michael Landon, with Cheryl Ladd as Lynn Noe and Joel Berti as Michael Landon Jr. The biopic detailed, from Michael Jr's point of view, the personal emotional trauma he endured during his parents' divorce and his father's premature death. The movie spanned a timeline from the 1960s through the early 1990s.

A plaque and small playground referred to as the "Little Treehouse on the Prairie" was erected in Knight Park, a central park in Landon's hometown of Collingswood. In 2011, the plaque was removed from the park by the borough and was later given to a local newspaper by an unnamed person. According to the Collingswood, NJ website, the plaque was removed during a fall cleanup with plans to return it to a safer location. The plaque was reinstated next to a bench in a safer location the following summer.[28][29]

Filmography

Film			
Year	**Title**	**Role**	**Notes**
1956	*These Wilder Years*	Boy in Poolhall	Uncredited
1957	*I Was a Teenage Werewolf*	Tony Rivers	
1958	*Maracaibo*	Lago Orlando	
1958	*High School Confidential*	Steve Bentley	
1958	*God's Little Acre*	Dave Dawson	
1959	*The Legend of Tom Dooley*	Tom Dooley	
1961	*The Errand Boy*	Joseph 'Little Joe' Cartwright	Uncredited
1976	*The Loneliest Runner*	John Curtis (adult)	
1982	*Love Is Forever*	John Everingham	
1984	*Sam's Son*	Gene Orman	
1990	*Where Pigeons Go to Die*	Hugh at 50	TV movie, director
1991	*Us*	Jeff Hayes	TV movie, director and writer
Television			
Year	**Title**	**Role**	**Notes**
1956	*Cheyenne*	U.S. Cavalry trooper	Uncredited
1957	*General Electric Theater*	Claude Duncan	Episode: "Too Good With a Gun"
1957	*The Restless Gun*	Sandy	Pilot episode
1957	*Tales of Wells Fargo*	Tad Cameron	Episode: "The Kid"
1958	*Cheyenne*	Alan Horn / 'Whitehawk'	1 episode
1958	*Wanted Dead or Alive*	Carl Martin	Episode: "The Martin Poster"
1958	*The Rifleman*	Outlaw	Episode: "End of a Young Gun"
1959–1973	*Bonanza*	Joseph 'Little Joe' Cartwright	428 episodes
1974–1983	*Little House on the Prairie*	Charles Ingalls / Narrator	187 episodes
1984–1989	*Highway to Heaven*	Jonathan Smith	111 episodes

Awards and honors

Year	Award / Organization	Category / Honor	Work	Result	Ref.
1969	Bambi Award	TV Series International	*Bonanza* (shared with Lorne Greene, Dan Blocker, Pernell Roberts)	Won	
1970	Bronze Wrangler Award	Fictional Television Drama	*Bonanza* episode: "The Wish" (shared with director, producer and cast)	Won	
1979	Golden Globe Award	Best TV Actor – Drama	*Little House on the Prairie*	Nominated	
1980	Spur Award	Best TV Script	*Little House on the Prairie* episode: "May We Make Them Proud"	Won	[30]
1984	Hollywood Walk of Fame	Television Star at 1500 N. Vine Street		Inducted	
1984	Golden Boot Award	Significant Contribution to the Western Genre		Honored	
1991	Youth in Film Award	Michael Landon Award	Outstanding Contribution to Youth Through Entertainment	Honored	[31]
1995	Television Hall of Fame	Significant Contribution to the Field of Television		Honored	[32]
1998	National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum	Western Performers Hall of Fame		Inducted	
2004	TV Land Award	Most Memorable Mane	*Little House on the Prairie*	Nominated	
2005	TV Guide	50 Sexiest Stars of All Time		Ranked #33	[33]

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External links

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